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## MIŁOSZ'S AMERICAN ALPHABET<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article presents a selection of Czesław Miłosz's comments on American culture, economy and politics during his diplomatic service in the United States in the years 1946–1950. They were formulated in his postwar correspondence and in a series of articles entitled “Life in the USA,” which he published in *Odrodzenie* under the pseudonym of Jan M. Nowak from 1946 to 1947.

**Key words:** American culture, economy, politics under President Truman, the image of the United States in Polish postwar press. Miłosz *vis-à-vis* America, Miłosz as a foreign correspondent

### African Americans

Miłosz's translation of *Negro Spirituals* was, to a certain degree, his private response to the demand for folk culture at home. At the same time, he sought to play a game, rendering translations of texts whose merits he recognized, notwithstanding the political circumstances. His were the first translations of *Negro Spirituals* into Polish, which must have seemed a valuable effort in its own right. The poet supplied them with a commentary which spoke volumes about the situation of the literature in Poland:

The contribution of *Negro Spirituals* to the folk songs of all times and all nations has been enormous. Not only on account of their music, but also on account of their poetry. Among the many things that enable us to tell genuine poetry from the counterfeit sort, only this seems indisputable: the full blaze and power of the simplest words. At the opposite end stand the greyness and

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torpor of those very same words used in journalism, whether rhymed or not. For many thousands of years poetry was the plinth of magic rites, and in magic the word is not a description of things, it is the thing-in-itself or its delegate (Miłosz 1946, No. 26, p. 4).

Miłosz uses *Negro Spirituals* to support his implicit *credo* of the sacral provenance of poetry and its redeeming value. He reads them in relation to Polish literature and compares the European canon to them. In the commentary he mentions the sources of the texts selected for translation, without mentioning, however, that the anthologies he used in his work, compiled by James Weldon Johnson and Carl Sandburg, were of symbolic significance to the emancipation of Black culture.

## Broadway

In the United States Miłosz carried on translating Shakespeare and popularising new Polish drama, although he was not a theatre-goer himself. His knowledge of Broadway was rudimentary at best. The rise of the first off-Broadway theatres escaped his attention. He did not notice the development of Black theatre. He was quick to sum up Americans as solely interested in light theatre, and refused to acknowledge that they had an understanding of the tragic. If the former observation cannot be fully dismissed, the latter requires a more delicate shading. His diplomatic service was at a time when such authors as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Thornton Wilder were rising to fame or sealing their positions. Of these four, the poet personally knew and appreciated only Wilder, whose plays he tried to promote in Poland, despite their being the least suitable for stage. He reported the American theatre's alleged rejection of Wilder, without investigating the causes, which were to be found in the very structure of Wilder's dramas. This is how Miłosz characterized O'Neill in his report for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "He is a writer whose position could be compared to that of K.H. Rostworowski's in pre-war Poland. He is from the older generation and is revered as America's greatest playwright. This authority of his, which must seem dubious to a European, is questioned by no one here" (Miłosz AMFA, g. 21, fld. 92, f. 1254). Miłosz is oblivious to the Brooklyn man Arthur Miller and the popularity of *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*. Miłosz gave *A Streetcar Named Desire* a venomous review, acknowledging, at best, the potential for psychoanalytical interpretation in Williams's drama.

## Centre and periphery

Miłosz contested the popular notion of America's uniformity. He strove to explain the differences between the industrial North and the rural South. After nearly two years of living across the Atlantic, he ventured his first general conclusions. He formulated a concept of American culture as shaped by an interplay between the centre and the periphery:

The myth of America (...) seems to involve speaking about its centre, and forgetting about its periphery. It is a large centre indeed (...) Yet we cannot forget that the periphery is not only the Blacks and not only the South, which has yet to recover from the Reconstruction Era, a massive savage exploitation of the land by the northern capital in the wake of the Civil War. The periphery of the United States encompasses the entire centre and southern parts - the entire land (Nowak 1947, No. 31, p. 1).

Both the centre and the periphery were assessed negatively. Such was his impression of New York in a letter to the Brezas: "There is little to compare with the sadness of these districts, the horror of a civilisation going nowhere" (Miłosz 2007: 525). He comments on the periphery: "Nowhere else have I seen so clearly the power of apathy of people in the peaceful countryside, over whose heads politicians run their businesses, creating the impression – but only the impression – that the people are in charge." (Nowak 1947, No. 46, p. 4)

The centre shapes the periphery through the media, giving the inhabitants of small towns and farmlands the illusion of living in a community. The periphery has its impact on the centre through migration to metropolises, where the incoming population organises their lives much as they once did in their respective homelands. Our correspondent concludes:

America is a province. A ruddy-faced, milky, jovial province. All her great cities, with the sole exception of New York, are provincial. A countryside can also have skyscrapers: take Chicago, for instance. A brawny, well- or even over-fed race of provincials benefiting from technological development populates this continent. A provincially mechanised race. And this is the flip side. A newspaper read in one of the corners of this countryside, or the radio, speaks of incomprehensible abstractions. Trying to explain something beyond these people's day-to-day experience amounts to the same as trying to write a popular version of Einstein's theories (Nowak 1947, No. 46).

Miłosz could see isolationist tendencies in America; he compared the country to a flower with closed petals (Nowak 1947, No. 46). At the same time, he wondered how to situate America and Europe in post-war Western civilisation, which of the two should be seen as a source of influence and which merely absorbed it, where to locate a potential centre and where the periphery. There was no simple answer to these questions.

## Daily news

Officers of the Polish Embassy in Washington received the following press titles: *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *New York Post*, *Daily Worker*, *Washington Post*, *Times Herald*, *Washington Daily News*, *Evening Star*, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, *St. Louis Dispatch*, *Gazette and Daily*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Times* from London, *Nowy Świat* [The New World], *Dziennik dla Wszystkich* [Daily for Everyone]. They also read periodicals: *Time*, *New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Harper's*, *United Nations World*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy Reports*, *Foreign Policy Bulletin*, *American Perspective*, *World News Letter*, *Report on World Affairs*, *In Fact*, *Marshall Plan Letters* and *Głos Ludowy* [The People's Voice]. One of Miłosz's duties was to read and summarise the press in daily reports. Records of the embassy's correspondence with the Ministry reveal substantial reading to be done and a shortage of workers to deal with it systematically. Miłosz might have thus made use of PRIS (Polish Research and Information Service) reports. It is difficult to determine the extent to which his briefs presented his reflections on his own reading, or if he availed himself of the aforementioned reports. He thought highly of the local journalism, which resulted in contacts with *Politics*, *The New Republic*, *Mainstream and Masses* and the editorial board of *P.M.* He developed an interest for discussing Polish matters; he considered the correspondence of Walter Lippman and William Lawrence and the articles by Earl Browder for *The New Republic* most accurate. He was quick to grasp that, in American public space, authority belongs to the journalist, playing the middleman between the elite of specialists and the people. It is from Americans that he learned to write the journalism in his *Życie w USA* [Life in the USA] series. He built a common ground with his readership through direct appeals and humorous punchlines, he diversified his style,

introduced quasi-dialogues, commented on satirical cartoons, and skilfully combined expert knowledge with a raconteur's tone.

## Eroticism

Remarks can be found in Miłosz's correspondence concerning American women's provocative way of behaving and dressing. It should be noted that these were not written by a prude or a sexual ascetic. There are a number of passages where the poet quips about America as the ideal place for skirt-chasing. What he meant was that the style of seduction that reigned across the Atlantic went beyond the European or Polish norms. The poet was bored with the nudity, which strips sex of its magic. He did not notice the flip side of this phenomenon: the development of American sexology, the academics' reclamation of the erotic, giving it a place in the public sphere. The years 1948–1955 saw Alfred Kinsey's famous reports on the sexual lives of men and women (Kinsey *et al.* 1948, 1953). Another important book that escaped Miłosz's attention was *Male and Female* (1949) by Margaret Mead, a precursor of feminist cultural anthropology, a friend of Ruth Benedict's, whom Miłosz met while helping to organise the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defence of Peace in Wrocław in 1948.

## Economy

Miłosz's economic views were formed by the realities of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Republic; hence his mistrust of American free market system. He witnessed the phasing out of the New Deal, replaced by the principle of the free market. He was alarmed by the Americans' faith in the market's self-regulation. It caused him disbelief that the Americans considered the regulation of economic life artificial and superfluous. Bearing in mind his experiences in Central Europe, he believed it necessary that an authority should monitor economic balance. Reading the forecasts by left-leaning experts, he expected the opposite economic policy to lead to a catastrophe. He joined Fritz Sternberg, an economist and a Marxian theorist from *The New Republic* in considering the possibility of economic collapse (Nowak 1947, No. 8). He was amazed to find that America, having profited from the war, was still experiencing significant growth, despite increased public

spending. He kept close tabs on statistical yearbooks, analysing the data in various sectors, observing a rise in prosperity through the increase of demand, consumption and export. His moral constitution, so typical of the East European intelligentsia, made him critically sensitive to the relationship between the tenets of the free market economy and social justice; over time, Miłosz noticed the positive effects of the Fair Deal. He complained that America, for all its advantages, did not come to the world's aid, a mission it was expected to undertake. In its politics Miłosz sensed ambitions of financial and military conquest. To a dialectic mind this fear, however well founded, called for an antithesis. This is nowhere to be found in Miłosz's writings of the time...

## Freedom of the media

Pressure from trade unions resulted in the shortening of the work week. This gave people more free time, which was exploited by the entertainment industry. In 1947 Miłosz notes:

The so-called soap-operas, that is, radio dramas sponsored by huge industrial concerns, arouse interest in sensational literature of the basest sort. The only bright spots in this sea of rubbish are the fairly extensive political news bulletins. Since film, more often than not, bears similar traits, the two most powerful communication media pay homage to something that could be euphemistically described as a policy of anti-intellectualism.

The former Polish radio employee bridled at the programmes' commercial interruptions and the excess of advertisements in newspapers. He analysed the ongoing consolidation of mass media and the transformation of the press industry as a result of progress and the concentration of capital. The monopoly of information space made him worry for the freedom of the media. It was suffering under the pressure of the economy: as more and more people turned to the radio and television for news, the cost of running newspapers rose. Concerns were established to compensate for this trend. Miłosz enumerated dailies that had disappeared after 1909. He attributed their decline to the consolidation of the market, where most titles were controlled by concerns. He perceived the decline of local papers as the biggest threat. In towns where only one daily paper was published, the public had access to news from only one source, and all the more so as local radio

stations and newspapers were generally owned by the same person. The monopoly cut even deeper, as it applied to the information itself:

Only part of what is published in press has been written by actual editors. Small newspapers receive ready-made editorials, illustrations, stories etc. from special press syndicates and agencies. Ninety-five per cent of dailies are catered to by one of three news agencies: International News Service (controlled by Hearst), United Press (controlled by a "chainlike" Scripps-Howards) and Associated Press (owned by a group of publishers) (Nowak 1947, No. 21).

All this prompted Miłosz to express the conviction that the freedom of the media in America was dwindling. It is unlikely that he intended this for the sake of propaganda, since he referred to a report by a committee of independent experts affiliated with the University of Chicago. What pervades this critique is an unexpressed disappointment in losing his faith in one of the founding myths of the New World, a disappointment that here, too, economic considerations had ruined utopian hopes for the construction of an ideal democracy.

## Harry Truman

Miłosz was beginning his diplomatic service when President Truman was reforming the post-war economy and facing the people's reaction to the changes: demobilisation, the employment act (designed to ensure the elimination of unemployment, increase production, and correlate prices and wages), and the gradual withdrawal from the policy of a controlled economy in favour of free-market capitalism. In the course of implementing his reforms, Truman struggled against waves of strikes and a boycott of price controls. Miłosz witnessed the economy's release from the state's influence; he saw the introduction of beneficial tax changes, regulations to keep rent down in cities, a scheme for investment in housing construction. However, he also saw coalminers' strikes, protests of businessmen and industrialists against the lowering of prices, and the consolidation of unions in a struggle for their rights. He mockingly portrayed Truman and his career path. He ironically regarded the American self-made man epitomised by the President. At the same time, Miłosz did record Truman's skilful cooperation with the oppositional Congress, and particularly came to value his work to close the gap between the cost of living and minimum

wage. He made no secret of his growing respect for Truman's tactics, able as he was to rise in polls at the outset of the presidential campaign through capturing his opponents' slogans and cooperating with Congress. Miłosz appreciated the President's informational politics, his media discussions of reform proposals beneficial to most Americans, which – as Truman was aware – were derided by the opposition. He wrote emphatically of his negotiating skills and unbending standpoint, despite pressure from Congress and business. He called the former tie salesman “a strong-armed man, bold and determined, a great man of a country inebriated with fresh power” (Nowak 1947, No. 10).

## Immigrants

Miłosz is curious about the Polish communities long established in America. The old émigrés are a subject of interest as a sociological phenomenon and as an electorate:

Only three national groups normally have a bearing on the popular vote: the Poles, the Italians and the Irish, a fact which is linked to both the Catholic background of those groups and to their position in American society. Polish Americans play a negligible role in the life of the United States, as a result of their disproportionately small share in the educated spheres of society, whose members hold key positions in the industry, politics and education. There is, however, an exception: the elections, when what matters is sheer numbers. Americans of Polish descent used to vote democratic and they robustly supported Roosevelt. After Yalta there was a decisive backlash, and it should be carefully considered (as some commentators suggest) whether it was not the few million Polish votes that tipped the scales in favour of the Republicans, which – given the serious consequences of the Republican victory – may prompt interesting reflections (Nowak 1947, No. 9, p. 2).

Miłosz the diplomat was critical about changes in immigration law, which was hard on Poles, while favouring immigrants of Nordic and Germanic descent, limiting the inflow of the Slavs (Nowak 1947, No. 27). He deemed this act to be racist. He analysed a 1924 table of “quotas” for immigration. Poland was listed as fourth, behind Ireland, Germany, and the United Kingdom. But if measured against the populations of those countries, a truer indicator could be established, allowing one to assess who was privileged by American immigration policy. Miłosz criticised the new reg-



ulations, citing the mass numbers of Displaced Persons. He saw the limits imposed on Slavic and Jewish immigration as a result of racial prejudice, ignorance of history, and fears of communist expansion, as, in the popular imagination, these groups were thought capable of infecting America. As such, he was frustrated by the passivity of the American Poles, who did not defend their own interests. The poet worked alone to correct negative opinions of Poles. He argued with David Davidson, the author of the novel *The Steeper Cliff*, who depicted Poles as Jew killers (Nowak 1947, No. 47). He was particularly vexed at having to battle the popular idea of Polish anti-Semitism. In *Odrodzenie* he discussed the tendentious portraits of Poles in Christopher Burney's novel *The Dungeon Democracy*, Isidor Frank Stone's *Underground to Palestine* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*. He also wrote on Burney's book in a brief for the Ministry, where he remarked that, after press reports of the Kielce pogrom, it was no longer possible to deliver lectures on the Holocaust in Poland.

## Jazz

In his letters, Miłosz boasted of having purchased a gramophone, and ranted about his new hobby of *record collecting*. We do not know, however, what records he listened to. His reports for the Ministry reveal that he attended jubilees in honour of Frederic Chopin. He mentioned concerts by Artur Rubinstein and new pieces by Andrzej Panufnik. None of the established sources documenting Miłosz's first American stay quote a visit to a New York music club or an opera. It is known that in 1949, on Broadway, very close to the place of the Miłosz family's temporary residence, the Birdland jazz club opened, which hosted Charlie Parker, Morris and Irving Levy, and later the greatest artists of the genre. There is no evidence of Miłosz's interest in classical and light music. He mentions Frank Sinatra's fame exclusively in terms of economic success. Among other comments, he remarks:

Frank Sinatra is a young singer specialising in sentimental songs not unlike the pieces by our Włast from before the war. Masses of American women, from adolescent girls to matrons, seem to be mildly insane about Sinatra and are ready to trample one another to death in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the deity's countenance. Sinatra is omnipotent, his name means more than those of the greatest politicians, writers or composers (Nowak 1947, No. 9).

Duke Ellington, Ray Charles and Nat King Cole are nowhere to be found. The figure of John Cage similarly escaped his attention.

## Lesson of the cinema

In America Miłosz was a regular movie-goer. He watched American films, including Hitchcock's *Notorious*, and European ones, such as *Rome, Open City*. Just as during his scholarship in France, he wrote reviews of films of various genres. He reviewed war films, as well as *The Best Years of Our Lives* by William Wyler, which won seven Academy Awards, a Golden Globe Award and a BAFTA Award for 1947 (Nowak 1947, No. 30). He showed acknowledgement for non-commercial scientific, documentary and reportage films. He came to see the reality of film production as the domain of the corporations that owned cinema chains. He could see the problems independent film artists faced. Miłosz saw the cinema as a subject of reflection in the context of popular culture, as he was able to cull the laws of mass cinematography from beneath the fairy-tale veneer:

American film shows a great concern for morality. This means that a sudden change in Cinderella's lot usually comes as a reward for her perseverance against all odds, her honesty, her resisting all temptations. American film is constantly in the spotlight. And literally so, as it is closely supervised and censored by film industry and social organisations. It 1) has to be commercially successful, 2) must not offend moral norms cherished by society and 3) must not offend any professional, class or racial groups (Nowak 1947, No. 30).

At the same time, he pointed out that film is often an effective way of forming attitudes, in contrast to propaganda in Europe, which was unattractive to the addressee:

Thus in America film does not enjoy the freedom of literature, and its didactic, practical-moral tendencies are ever more strongly reinforced, as it is realised that this fairy tale on the screen has an enormous impact on the public mores. (...) All in all, didacticism seems the only outlet for American film at the moment. Americans are gifted pedagogues: they can teach through humour (Nowak 1947, No. 30, p. 5).

## Literature

Miłosz kept track of book sales lists. He began using the word *bestseller*, and throughout his correspondence he discussed current booksellers' top sellers. Although he was irritated that the local book market was modelled to appeal to the mass reader, he was impressed by the number of new publications, as well as the copies per edition. He discovered the mechanisms of the publishing market were aimed not only at increasing sales, but also at promoting literacy. He described how the "Portable Library" by Viking Press works, the merits of Penguin Books and the "Modern Library" series, he recognised the significance of subscriptions and book clubs (Miłosz 1947 No. 6). Nevertheless, he did not feel comfortable in the commodified culture. On the one hand, he bemoaned the dissolution of the USIBA (United States International Book Association), an organisation mediating international cooperation between publishers and book exchange, beginning a relationship with UNESCO and the International PEN Club. On the other hand, he was dumbfounded by the cosmopolitanism of American bookshops. The abundance of publishing aroused the activist in him – he endorsed stocking the Polish book market with more foreign titles, not only the latest ones, which required the purchase of copyrights, but also the classics in better translations.

## Metropolis

As a Vilnius man, Miłosz was not astonished by the scale of American metropolises. His aesthetic model of the city was shaped by Paris, Prague, Rome and Venice, which recur in his poetic visions in America. He was openly disenchanted with the local big-city sights. Over time, he grew to like New York, to the disadvantage of Washington D.C., whose cityscape he found monotonous and dull. Business trips took Miłosz to the academic towns of New England, although he was not tempted to juxtapose the cosmopolitan metropolises with the closed incubators of American academia. He also met Polish communities in Chicago and Detroit. The two cities struck him as relics of the Industrial Revolution. He was fond of antiquation, speaking of the industrial centres as if they were exhibits, and of miniaturisation, comparing Chicago to pre-war Radom. Both tricks can be read, on an emotional level, as symptomatic of his experience of alienation,

and on an intellectual level, as a symptom of his distance from American civilisation.

## Nation

A country of the greatest intellectual apathy and intellectual slumber (...)

A country of myths and taboo, a country of thoughts in pincers. (...)

A country of paramount efficiency, action, skilfulness, flexible, boasting that its people can accommodate to any circumstances and do over a couple of years what other peoples would need a century to do. (...)

A country of a multitude of religions and temples, yet utterly pagan, for religion here is merely a rite of social interaction, something which is considered to be appropriate, just as going to football games is. Religion as charities, church as a place of neighbourhood gatherings, an institution as established as the institution of bridge or whisky nights. (...)

A country with enormous masses of deeply humane people, who find a vent for their religious yearnings in assisting their neighbours, ready as they are to go to distant countries to live in the direst of conditions, just to help, heal, teach, hoping but for one reward – the sense that they are useful to others. (...)

A country with the grace of a bear when it comes to foreign policy. (...)

A country with an ever-growing number of psychiatric patients. (...)

A country whose moral fibre was mangled by the Industrial Revolution: no one but Americans know how terrible an undertaking it was. Nothing has remained of the old America, nothing of its sentiments, nothing of its beliefs, nothing of its customs. The production of cinematographic myths of the history of the United States is a futile business. Everyone knows that those are merely legends, since in fact no tradition remains, there is a total void. Hence the desperate clinging to the myths and taboos, hence the desire to be **American**, which grows stronger the less it is clear what it actually means (Nowak 1947, No. 48, p.1).

This fragment from the *Życie w USA* series is written with rhetorical flourish. It might be not altogether inappropriate to read it alongside Norwid's "My Song"... Syntactic parallelism accompanied by pictorial antitheses is a homiletic patent, which here, too, works flawlessly. This adroit diagnosis strikingly lacks the word *nation*. Miłosz was unaware of the 1940s discussion of American identity and the dynamic development of American Studies. He was still in a New World described in relation to the Old World, the latter being not only a reference point, but a point of departure. He either did not notice, or underestimated the significance of the post-war emancipation of the United States, Americans' drive to self-

definition in terms fully independent from European tradition (Edwards, Gaonkar 2010).

## Perception of space

The poet found the climate in America difficult to endure. It took him a long time to get accustomed to the temperature and humidity of the air on the East Coast. His trouble in adapting was aggravated by the lack of feeling at home, of a basic bond with his environment. If it is true that a person and their environment shape each other, Miłosz showed a resistance to submit to the process. He felt like a random observer, whose initial bewilderment gave way to gradual disappointment as he verified his ideas of the New World. He was tired with the sense of the cities' unreality. He was initially overwhelmed by New York and Washington because of he had no mental maps to them, apart from some other reasons. Miłosz perceived them as monoliths with no significant landmarks, with no subdivisions into districts or ghettos. Over time, his accounts made less and less distinction between what is observed and what is real. At the same time, his awareness grew of the relation between a description and the circumstances or perception. Noting his observations from the late 1940s, he tried to account for the circumstances that shaped them. Following 1947, he travelled more frequently and widely. He obtained a driving licence and began making road trips. After the horrors of Nazi occupation his writings of 1947 seem particularly important, especially in the light of what he wrote to Paweł Hertz: "America has restored my ability to behold worldly phenomena" (Miłosz 2007: 497).

## Physiology

A most acute source of anguish for Miłosz was the impossibility of sharing his war experiences. He searched in vain for a sensitivity to history in the European sense of the term. He gave them the quality of "physiologism" (Miłosz 1947, No. 44), sometimes interpreted as synonymous with Witkacy's use of the term "bestiality," and at other times as a cult of nature, which includes a yearning for a return to Rousseau's state of innocence. Miłosz's categorical denial of Americans' historical intuition was most

strongly expressed in the first months of his stay in the USA. The poet was, however, unaware of the local discussions on World War Two. He came across neither the essays by Hanna Arendt published in America, nor the diary of Anne Frank. Furthermore, he did not know publications discussing the consequences of the war overseas (Merill 1948) or the effects of the A-bomb.

His critical view was to evolve as he read. Arnold Toynbee spurred him on towards metaphysical and eschatological reflections on history. Edward Gibbon caused him to reflect on the ancient history of the world. William Faulkner's search for a universal paradigm in provincial life made him sensitive to the narrative and parabolic dimension of history. After 1947 Toynbee and Faulkner became shields against the "Hegelian sting." Besides the voices of Antigone and Cassandra, the poet heard new voices to release him from the trap of intellectual demonism.

## Racism

Miłosz often repeated that:

the only living people (...) are the Black and the Native Americans, if we take people as groups and not as individuals. It is the lowest, poorest, the most underprivileged group. Mexicans, masses of whom live at Polish peasants' living standards, or worse, are alive – they feel, love, create art, fill exhibition halls with crowds: and the great Mexican leftist political painters draw their energy from them (Miłosz 2007: 428).

He was interested in their socio-economic situation and the conditions in which their culture developed. In his reports for the MFA and press correspondence he touched upon the problem of racism. Dissenting from a chorus of critics at home, who made of racism a convenient argument in their attacks on America, Miłosz accurately described the standards of living in a multiracial society. He discussed the relationship between race and social standing. He emphasised that the standards of living of the Black and the immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe were similar, and only in competition do the latter have the advantage. He discovered that Blacks and Poles were often neighbours in poor districts, and that antagonisms between Whites and Blacks derived mainly from these groups. He stressed that "the living standards of the black population, very low by

American standards, are higher today than those of the Polish population” (Nowak 1947, No. 7).

The theme of racism throughout Miłosz's correspondence may be followed as an instance of self-censorship. On the one hand, he did not avoid the topic of racial discrimination; on the other, he did not mention the institution of segregation. He did not provide the propaganda at home with evidence – on the contrary, in describing exhibitions of Afro-American painting and sculpture he defused the arguments of all those who based their judgements on America on its racism.

## Schools

In the *Życie w USA* series Miłosz noted:

School here is fun: it involves a great deal of laughter. A child is miserable should it happen one day that he or she cannot go to school. With this laughter and ease the child is taught the inexorable rules of the social contract. Above all, humility, timidity and obeisance are combated. The teacher is just another pal, not a 'sir.' The result? A twelve-year-old boy behaves like a real citizen. There is no blushing, fumbling anxiety, or treacherous artificial deference to adults. Moreover, there is gender equality. A seventeen-year-old boy behaves just like his female peer (Nowak 1947, No. 46).

The activity of a cultural attaché required contacts with the world of academia. The poet spoke with respect about the free university studies for World War II veterans – a Truman initiative. His attention was drawn by the educational role of the media. At the same time, he bore witness to the growing stratification of American society. The country with the most advanced technologies was simultaneously a country with an army of people mired in intellectual stupor, venomously depicted in the poem “Central Park.” Miłosz sought to reach a deeper significance in this contradiction. He pointed to the marginal role played by intellectuals in public life. He described artistic and intellectual circles fenced off by the walls of academia, which kept new ideas from spreading freely. He called them *Brahmins* (Nowak 2007: 178–179). Specialists, he claimed, did not enter into public dialogues, whereas the cult of practical, applied knowledge left the masses indifferent to the refinement of scholars and artists. After a UNESCO congress he wrote:

This convention, like many in America, was a disgrace to behold. The biggest names of the American academic world wasted time on discussions that were perfectly sterile and carefully skirted details. At times the observer had the impression of taking part in a parliament of lunatics, although this method of spouting nonsense may be lacking a certain intentionality and cunning (Miłosz AMFA g. 21, fld. 83, f. 1127).

Thsee remarks on America's inner isolationism are a kind of overture to *Visions from San Francisco Bay*.

## Technology

The Miłosz family had such everyday home appliances as *an electric ice house* or *an electric laundry* (Nowak 1946, Nos. 51–52), of which the poet said that it “washes, rinses, wrings and dries clothes, all by itself,” (Nowak 1946, Nos 51–52), a radio, which he called a *radio apparatus* (Nowak 1946, Nos 51–52), an air conditioner, a TV set etc. The economic boom was having its day, and the demand for these goods increased at such a rapid pace that it deserved a mention in Miłosz's *Życie w USA*. His curiosity was not limited to technological progress in the motor industry or home appliances. In his view, the future of the American economy was linked to the development of the arms industry. His confidential dispatch about “a mysterious apparatus with which Americans will soon be able to see what is happening in the streets of Warsaw or Shanghai” (Nowak 1947, No. 1) might seem quaint to us today. The availability of technological conveniences compelled him return to his pre-war reflections on the effects of modernisation on the human being. Miłosz developed a concept of the naturalisation of technology, informed by European turn-of-the-century. There is nothing to suggest that Miłosz might have had contact with the writings of Lewis Mumford, who had approached the problem from a local perspective.

## Utility

When and under whose influence was Miłosz's rule of utility shaped? After reading Jacques Maritain? During the war? In America, where the tradition of pragmatism had found its way into everyday life? As a result of ob-



serving the American *homo oeconomicus*, who minimizes effort to achieve maximum gain? Was he influenced by English poets and writers of the Enlightenment period? The word “useful” recurs in Miłosz’s writings from the 1940s too often to go unmentioned. Given the poet’s titanic work as cultural attaché, we may assume that his American experience made the rule of utility an overriding imperative.

## Visual arts

For the former avant-gardist the relationship between literature and visual arts, including cinema and photography, was closer than that between music and poetry. Miłosz was a regular visitor to the National Gallery of Art in Washington. In New York he visited the Museum of Modern Art. In one of his ministerial reports we read that he met Peggy Guggenheim (Miłosz AMFA g. 21, fld. 87, f. 1186). He was the first commentator on the Guggenheim collection and enthusiastically reported on the *Art of This Century* exhibition organised in New York under the Guggenheims’ patronage (Miłosz 1947, No. 7). Seeing works by Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Rouault and Dufy made him wonder: “What is the state of our artistic sensitivity and preferences in the wake of the war?” (Miłosz 1947, No. 7). This is a question about the state of art, and more specifically, about the state of the visual avant-garde. It is interesting to note that the poet predicted the death of the high avant-garde and a return to realism. Needless to say, he would not regret such a shift in aesthetic values. He commented on the Cuban and Mexican political paintings of Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, the latter a painter inspired by the art of the Native Americans. He became acquainted with contemporary art of Americans of other races, including the Black and the Native Peoples. To the latter he devoted long passages in his correspondence for *Nowiny Literackie* [Literary Dispatches] in pioneering reflections on the commercialisation of art.

## War – The Cold War

Truman withdrew British-American troops from the occupied zone of Germany previously promised to the USSR. In June 1945 the United States officially recognised the Polish government, and in December the govern-

ments of Bulgaria and Romania as well. Only with the Soviet intervention in Iran was there a shift Truman's foreign policy. The new course became clearer after Churchill's visit in 1946: the term "Iron Curtain" was used for the first time in his Fulton Speech. In Miłosz's MFA reports he discussed the speech's significance at length. Beginning in 1947, a new strategy in American-Soviet relations was developing. Miłosz registered this watershed. He turned his attention to Henry Wallace, who saw no jeopardy in US-USSR relations. When the option of 'containment' prevailed within Truman's administration, and Wallace was dismissed alongside Secretary of State James Francis Byrnes (George Marshall replaced the latter), our correspondent related the events to his Polish readers (Nowak 1947, No. 9). But when the events in Greece and Turkey in 1947 proved the politics of containment to be a fiasco, his journalism was concerned with racism, Poland's misguided ideas about America, and the oeuvre of H.G. Wells. Not only did the author avoid covering the Truman Doctrine, he employed mere *bon mots* in his simplified judgement of the programme in order actually to disparage it. Only in April did he return to the theme of foreign policy, including the implementation of the *get tough with communists* and *get tough with Russia* programme. In the speech explaining the tenets of the Truman Doctrine he could hear echoes of the Fulton Speech. He ascribed its tone to the support of Marshall, who was staying in Moscow at the time. He derided the famous act of expelling communists from the homeland. When Congress voted to support the Greeks and the Turks in 1947, Miłosz interpreted the withdrawal of the British from the region as an attempt to save the crumbling colonial empire, and he pertinently highlighted connections between the United States' offer to assist and the national interests.

**trans. Mikołaj Denderski**

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